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The Commodification of Black Women in Urban Fiction and African American Chick Lit

African American Chick Lit and its crossover into the genre of Urban Lit, reflects and reinforces the commodification of Black women and other women of color by not only portraying these women as overtly sexual, but as using their sexuality as a tool to gain material wealth and a glamorous lifestyle. The authors of these texts depict female protagonists who see their own bodies as commodities which can be leveraged for material gain, a notion that depends *on* the widespread notion of women's bodies as commodities, and also depends on the notion being widespread, in fact generally accepted. Obviously this degrades both men and women, and in the case of these texts, do twice the damage because they conform to common stereotypes about the “hypersexuality” of all Black people, a discourse historically used to argue their essential vulgarity as a race and to justify the continued exploitation of Black women's bodies for sexual gratification. To the extent this mentality does exist or indeed thrive in Black communities, it ought to signal the extent to which these communities have been brutalized. Rather than having these stereotypes and mentalities recapitulated or exploited by authors or publishers, we all (including those in the literary world) ought to invite a more compassionate understanding of the problem, the crisis, which affects us all. The novels present a model of personhood for women and men alike that that is only fulfilled through consumption and wealth that should be garnered at whatever cost including the continued exploitation of the sexuality of Black men and women. After doing close-readings of three novels within the Urban and African American chick lit genres, *Bling* by Erica Kennedy, *The Accidental Diva* by Tia Williams, and *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life* by Lyah Beth LeFlore and examining the covers and marketing of several others, it is clear to me that we as readers are not invited by authors or publishers to connect with genuine, “round” Black characters, but instead are expected to

consume the ways in which they have been exploited by publishers, booksellers, and authors alike.

Ultimately, these representations are not only exploitive of Black men and women because of their negative representations, but because Chick Lit and Urban fiction are genres that continually perpetuate stereotypes about gender and race while all the while supposedly being for an audience. With this in mind Chick Lit and Urban fiction authors as well as similar media capitalize on the consumptive practices that are glamorized within their own pages reinforcing ideas about excess and material worth that are disadvantageous to all of us who want to live in a society that sees the most positive contributions and representations put forth by all citizens, especially those who have been historically marginalized.

Content and The Career Woman: A Girl's Guide to Stereotyping

Traditional Chick Lit pieces have, from their inception, been predominately focused on the professional and romantic lives of career women. With pieces like Candace Bushnell's *Sex and the City* (which spawned the immensely popular HBO series of the same name) these books have largely targeted an audience that they have described within their pages as young, career -women, living in an urban environment like Manhattan or London “[Chick Lit] is aimed largely at single, professional women in their 20s and 30s” (Ferriss 1). These earlier pieces included mostly white women as the protagonist who enjoys major success (i.e. money) in her job as a journalist (Bridget Jones in *Bridget Jones's Diary*), fashion magazine assistant (Andy Sax from *The Devil Wears Prada*), or even public relations executive (Samantha Jones from *Sex and the City*). These kinds of careers for women either play upon stereotypical assumptions about women's supposedly great ability to communicate or their supposed love of all things beauty, fun, and fashion. Although there are minor exceptions to this rule - Andy Sax loathes the “clackers” that she works with citing their vapidness and ignorance of real social problems, but she ultimately capitalizes off to this glamorous lifestyle by gaining her first real (lucrative) success as a writer by writing a story about her experience that will appeal to audience of *Seventeen* magazine (Weisburger 13). This being said, many of these novels also focus on the glamorous and romantic sides of

these women's lives. Not only is her career glitzy and exciting, but much of her time away from the office usually consists of talking to her female friends, shopping, or fantasizing about the perfect man and the perfect marriage.

All of these elements have made their way into many new Chick Lit pieces that are meant to appeal to a wide array of ethnic women and women of color with a few minor changes. Sadly, this now means that they often incorporate the worst clichés about these ethnicities, in addition to the worst clichés about women. *Bling*, *the Accidental Diva*, and *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life* all emphasize the importance of consumption and the material trappings of success to indicate societal status. By name alone *Bling* references the importance that money (symbolized by expensive and elaborate jewelry) has on the lives of the characters of the novel. The word “bling” arose as a hip-hop term that denoted elaborate jewelry (seen on the cover by a sparkling jewel) and its origins in this music genre conjures images about the subject matter and characters that will be addressed within the novel. Although “bling” has infiltrated the mainstream pop culture lexicon it is still widely understood as a word that was made famous by a genre of music largely made up of Black men and women. This being the case, the novel focuses on a cast of characters made up mostly of Black men and women in the music industry, but the implication after merely reading the title is that bling will be the focus and desire of the characters and the novel as a whole.

Many of these novels conform perfectly to the imperative, the slight variation on the cliché – something that will stand out enough to get noticed, but which confirms widely-accepted and acceptable racial stereotypes. While characters like Billie in *The Accidental Diva* still have careers in the world of high fashion (she's a beauty editor for *De Jour* magazine) or Destiny Day in *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life* as a hot party promoter and organizer similar to Samantha Jones, many women of color are portrayed, as I noted earlier, as prostitutes, gold diggers, or in their most glamorous incarnation in *Bling* as music artists or executives in the music industry. All of these characters, with the exception of Billie in

the *Accidental Diva*, ultimately use their sexuality to gain personal favors, money, or a glamorous lifestyle.

Characters aren't the only ones using their sexuality for money, Urban Chick Lit publishers have no problem making the hard-sell (no pun intended) using highly sexualized and spectacular language. Harlem Moon, the publishers of *Weapons of Mass Seduction* and *Gold Diggers*, used the following as a plot summary for the latter on their website promoting various new pieces of Urban fiction, "Enter the world of 'Gucci, glitz, and glamor' in this deliciously decadent look into the lives of the young, the rich, the beautiful, and the conniving...Paulette, Gillian, and Reese are three gold diggers who have dollar signs in their eyes and gold digging in their DNA." (Harlem Moon website). Not only are the three main characters in the novel gold diggers, but they are gold diggers by birth! Gold digging is an essential and intrinsic part of these women's selves and there is no implication that this kind of mentality about economic mobility or consumption could be a product of socio-economic factors that are widely prevalent in our current culture. This kind of rhetoric concerning women of color not only perpetuates the stereotype that they are manipulative and "conniving", but also that this is a quality that women, specifically Black women, are innately born with and not a product of a society that emphasizes consumption for women as a way to forge identity and dependence on a man or partner for one's own subsistence.

I want to note that I don't think that novels like *Bitch*, *Whore*, or *Gold Diggers* are necessarily indicative of the Chick Lit genre even though they cover similar themes and have a similar romantic arc since the female protagonists don't have what is usually deemed a successful career, but I use them simply as ways of showing how presumptions about the sexuality of women of color is exploited and ideas about consumerism and excess have proliferated literary representations. This being the case, I think that novels like *Bling*, *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life*, and *The Accidental Diva* have simply become "classier" ways of showing the same kinds of stereotypes and racist presumptions. The characters

in these novels aren't actually prostitutes, but there supposedly “high-powered” jobs aren't really so.

Within these novels there still exists the idea that women of color are money-grubbing, conniving, and will perform sexually for money or material gain.

Mimi (think Mariah Carey) in *Bling* changes from a small-town singer with stars in her eyes to the girlfriend of Triple Large Records head executive Lamont (think Tommy Mottola) who not only manipulates her into changing her look and ideas about her own music because of his dominant position as her boss and authority figure, but showers her with expensive gifts and luxury as soon as they form a sexual relationship. Their relationship is wrought with misogynistic and patriarchal undertones as Lamont instructs Mimi on how to thank him for all that he's done for her during sexual intercourse and she capitulates knowing it will continue to garner her the lifestyle to which she has become accustomed, “Tell daddy you love him,” he ordered, thrusting slowly, So she did. And he came...Hey, if that's was what it took, she'd do it. Lamont did everything and anything he could do to make her blissfully happy” (Kennedy 300). Mimi feels as though she is practically trapped not only because Lamont is her boss and her unwillingness could lose her the position that she has gained as an R&B artist, but she is also trapped by the glamorous lifestyle that she has internalized as being better than the working class existence that she had before her fame. Practically everyone in our society values money for the privileges that it allows – a good home, good food, and the occasional luxury, but Mimi has become mired in our current cultural prerogative that believes that More is always better and her position within the hip-hop/R&B/music industry has perpetuated and glamorized this lifestyle to an even greater extent. In this scenario women don't really have any power (sexual or otherwise), but are being molded and coerced into conforming to an image that society or the man that is keeping them in this lifestyle deem appropriate.

Greed, Glamor, and the Gold Digger: Urban Chick Lit Covers Get Our Attention

The first experience that many readers have with Chick Lit is in seeing the brightly colored vivid

images contained on the novels cover. These book covers display the Black female body in several ways that perpetuate stereotypes concerning what kinds of bodies are acceptably beautiful for women of color and continue to exploit racist and sexist ideas about Black women's sexuality being inherently linked to consumerism and the exchange of goods for services. The cover for *Gold Diggers*, an African-American chick lit/ Urban novel written by Tracie Howard and published by Harlem Moon, depicts a presumably naked or minimally dressed woman of color with gold eyeshadow and gold jewelry as to mimic the novel's title. The term “gold digger” was identified as early as the 1920's to represent “a girl or woman who attaches herself to a man for gain” (OED) It has also continued to proliferate the pop culture lexicon in recent years with hip hop stars Kanye West and Ludacris both recording hit songs entitled “Gold Digger”.

West's song depicts two different realities for Black female sexuality that are reenforced and recapitulated in our culture in many successful hip hop albums and Urban/ African American Chick Lit novels. Both of these depictions having negative consequences for women of color. In West's song “gold digging” becomes not only a woman attaching herself to a man for gain, but participating in a sexual relationship with a man for personal gain, “If you fuckin' with this girl then you betta' be paid” (West) From the start, West clearly implies that if a woman is able to capitulate into giving oral sex or at the very least “getting down” and begging she can then be rewarded materially, “Now I ain't sayin' she a gold digger/ But she ain't messin' wit no broke niggas/ Get down girl, go 'head get down/ Get down girl, go 'head get down” (West) The second verse of “Gold Digger” depicts a woman who doesn't use her sexuality to manipulate men, but instead supports the man who she has a relationship with only to be cast aside for what is implied as a more prestigious “white girl” when he finally manages to trade his Datsun for a Benz, “But when you get on he leave your ass for a white girl” (West). I will address the connection between hip hop and Urban/ African American Chick Lit more fully later on, but this “damned if you do, damned if you don't” mentality about Black female sexuality is pervasive in many of these novels and our

culture at large, presenting very few positive ideas or notions about changing negative constructions about Black male sexual domination and conversely Black female sexual subjectivity.

Tanika Lynch's *Whore*, published by Triple Crown Publications in 2006, is even more explicit in its depiction of women of color as literally - “whores.” With the tagline, “Whoever said whoring wasn’t easy, never lied! But somebody had to do it,” the author makes it clear that this will not be a novel that attempts to change or make readers aware of the social, political, and economic problems that have made prostitution necessary for many women, but implies that someone will *always* have to participate in prostitution so why bother trying. This tagline assumes that there will always be a demand for prostitutes and that this kind of exploitation is human nature or immutable. Lynch implies that societies will always tolerate sex work, and will always need to, so long as it is confined to ghettos. Although prostitution is definitely a violent and horrible reality for many women, the insistence and recapitulation that it will always exist and that it will always continue to be necessary is unbelievably cynical. With this kind of attitude *Whore* fails to address the historical economic factors that have commodified the labor and bodies of Black men and women and thus continues to perpetuate an internalization of a dominant white and patriarchal ideology that has oppressed many Black people for centuries:

These images are decontextualized from their roots in slavery and its legacy of racial rule, and are repackaged by mass media and popular culture, helping to reproduce the hegemonic ideologies and replicate social inequality. Today's bad black girl-video vixen imagery is linked to historic controlling images of the wench and the Jezebel...Today's pimped-out street-wise urbanly clad gangsta brotha is linked historically to the brute black buck of slave economy(Richardson 790). A glamorized view of prostitution and the lifestyle surrounding it in part legitimizes the practice and cynically ignores the historical, social, and cultural values which currently exist in this country that allow prostitution to continue.

Like *Whore*, Deja King's *Bitch* cover is a testament to the way in which women of color are

represented as not just women seeking money from men through manipulation, but also literally as prostitutes. We've all seen the image of a prostitute leaning against the side of a building or walking down a sidewalk looking for her next client, from *Pretty Woman* (1990) to *Pimps Up, Ho's Down*, (1999) this image has become synonymous with the culture of prostitution that is known to “mainstream” America. *Bitch's* cover capitalizes on this knowledge and shows a scantily dressed woman of color in a red dress (a sexually provocative color traditionally donned by harlots and prostitutes) leaning against the side of building with the image of an expensive, new convertible in the background. I can see where this is going and it ain't good.

While *Whore* and *Bitch* both contain images of women that are objectified through their sexuality they also perform a technique that is seen often in Chick Lit cover-art – seeing women from the neck down. We as viewers are not invited to see the person as a whole, and instead invited to objectify the body, without having to suffer the anxiety of a return gaze and any tinge of accountability. These covers don't allow us to see the whole person and in this sense allows us as viewers to see these women as nameless and literally faceless individuals. Without a head (or a brain for that matter) these women not only become a meager representation of *all* women, and in this case all women of color, but also ignorant, vapid, and uncaring for anything but money. In reality, the bodies of these female models are used to sell these novels, while ironically it is made clear that they are, as characters, selling their own bodies in the process as prostitutes. In this context it is universally understood by book publisher, bookseller, book author, and model that the value of the Black female body is understood through its assumed ceaseless sexuality, but even though paid and willing, the model or even the prostitute is the only one being exploited. She is the least able to control the market that has made her perceived sexuality a commodity:

[The Black female body] once appropriated into a global market culture, as was the case in slavery and contemporarily in popular culture, the beauty lies in the market value of the

hypersexualized black body itself, intensified to such a degree that a face is not even needed; the body produces pleasure or sells. If a face is needed, it should be the most profitable, the most light-sinned, with the kind of hair most associated with Anglo-Americans...Unlike the days of slavery, today women can be paid for their bodies, even if they do not control the market or their own self-representation. (Richardson 795)

These covers exploits a weakness in the audience to objectify the body, to see it as an object of sexual desire, to feel the power the sex-object is able to exercise, but in so doing give a false perception of the power that these women truly have in regards to the way in which their sexuality is commodified.

The cover of *Weapons of Mass Seduction* by Lori Bryant-Woolridge is similar to Kanye West's "Gold Digger" in that its cover portrays women of color as dangerous and criminal in their sexuality and rather explicitly implies that Black women literally use their sexuality as a weapon against men for their own person material gain. This represents a political-economy of contempt, tit-for-tat, a currency which only devalues the community and represents a very narrow range of experience. Given the almost complete dominance of these representations in media, positive role models become few and far between, "Misogyny and patriarchy are very much a way of life in America. It goes from Wallstreet to main street. Hip hop and its dominant form contributes to the worst of degrading images of women, especially Black women. At the same time, there are hip hop artists who are very critical of those degrading images, but those artists don't receive the kind of visibility that they should"(West Hip Hop vs. America) This also highlights a tendency on the part of critics to overestimate the power of these images, and underestimate the good sense and good doings of everyday people, assuming that they have little power in changing these attitudes or deciding what they really want to view and consume.

Bling and *The Accidental Diva* have slightly less obvious uses of gender and racial cliches because of their lack of explicit body imagery, but the way in which these covers are laid-out and marketed to consumers implies that there are certain assumptions about what women enjoy, namely the

color pink and jewelry. The most recent paperback editions of both of these novels employ the use of color and graphic imagery to elucidate the ever present association of women (particularly Black women and women of color) with consumption and greed. *Bling* will jump out at you from the shelves with its hot pink cover, but the graphic-art and title also allow a potential consumer to recognize that this novel will not only probably be for and about women, but that more specifically it is intended by the writer and publisher to be for Black women.

The Accidental Diva is a similar incidence of this kind of marketing. With jeweled and pink lettering the cover-art appeals to the stereotypical image of women as consumers, but the title itself also implies that the main character might be a Black women. The word “diva” has historically referred to an operatic singer or a woman with great talent, but more recently it has signified many great Black female vocalists from Whitney Houston, Gladdis Knight, and Pattie Labelle to contemporary artists like Mariah Carey and Beyonce Knowles. Thus, its connotation in pop culture will, for many, conjure images of Black women.

While I think it is important to understand the negative representations of women of color in regards to the cover art of many of these Chick Lit/ Urban novels, I don't want to suggest that they are the only covers that portray an overly sexualized view of women. The covers of many “traditional” Chick Lit pieces show women in various states of undress or in sexually provocative poses as well. The American cover art for *Bridget Jones's Diary*, often considered to be the first Chick Lit piece, shows just the eyes and mouth of a woman peeking through a notebook; eyes wide open and mouth agape the cover is highly suggestive of the performance of oral sex. Other covers, like Jane Green's *Jemima J* or *The Other Woman*, objectify the women on there covers by only showing the parts of their bodies that are typically thought of as provocatively sexual, valuing their bodies for their visual stimulation and potential sexuality.

Eisa Nefertari Ulen speaks at length about how mainstream publishers and booksellers are not

only further perpetuating overly sexual representations of women of color, but giving readers little or no choice about their consumption of literature, making it practically impossible to get a real sense of the broad wealth of textured and unique Black literature that exists outside of this genre:

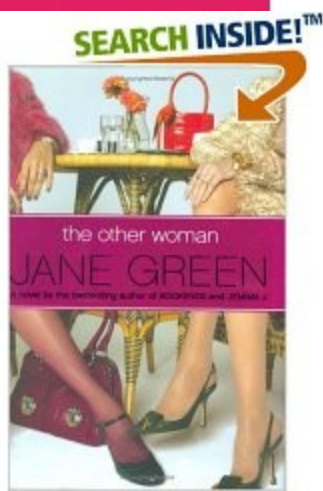
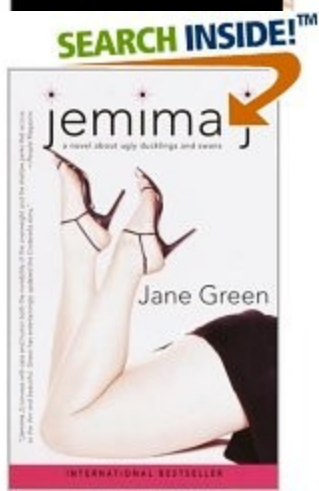
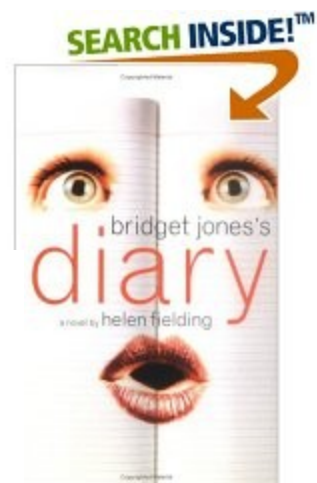
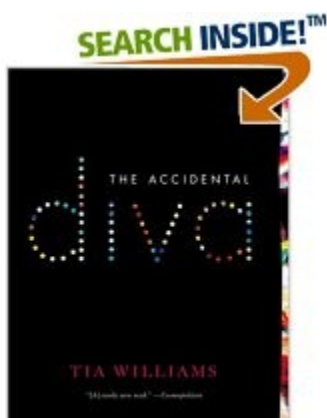
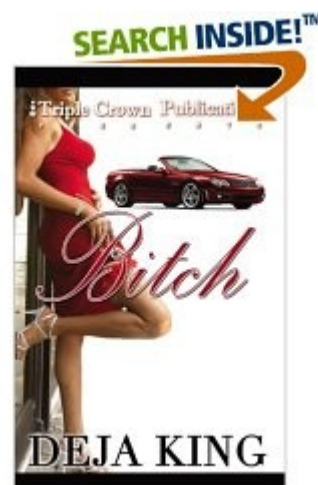
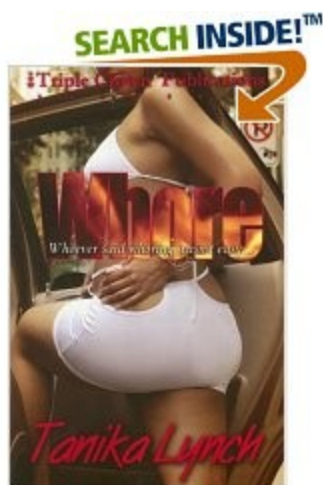
Mainstream bookstores cram [Urban fiction] books on the shelves and help dictate the cover choices mainstream publishers make. The numbers seem to confirm the Great American Myth, one this country has always sold, and sold well: Black people *are* hypersexual, *are* pathological; they feel but don't think. Even more disturbing is this Myth: Black people *are* dangerous in their hypersexual, pathological irrationality. Perhaps most disturbing of all, we, Black folk, especially young Black folk, are actually starting to believe these stereotypes about ourselves. *We're literally buying into the mythology.*" (Ulen 18)

The sad truth, as Ulen points out, is that many authors that don't even claim or want to have their work associated with this kind of representation are oftentimes forced or manipulated by the kind of mentality that is present in publishing houses and bookstores.

Authors like Christopher Chambers, author of the Angela Biven's mystery series, or Bridgett M. Davis, author of *Shifting Through Neutral*, have faced repercussions from publishers who encouraged Black writers to "sex up" their work. Publishers at Random House insisted that Chambers add and play up sexual scenes in a novel he submitted as well as downplay the suspense and more intellectual literary elements of his book in order to "build a bigger Black audience" (Ulen 19). For Bridgett M. Davis this kind of attitude about "targeting the Black market" can be seen in the new cover that was given to the paperback edition of her novel *Shifting Through Neutral*. Although the novel explores the relationship of a father and daughter living in Detroit during the Motown era and was nominated for a Hurston/ Wright Award for its thoughtful portrayal of these characters and themes, the new cover in no way reflects this relationship (Ulen 19). Instead, we see a cover that shows a woman of color with a low-cut shirt exposing a slight amount of cleavage who is gazing at herself in a mirror and seemingly contemplating her beauty.

This book cover is in no way indicative of the plot as had been true of its original hardcover, but Ulen notes that publishers and many times authors simply believe that slapping a seemingly more sexualized cover on a novel will garner it more commercial success.

These kinds of covers and oftentimes the content within are clearly a step in the wrong direction concerning the representation of women, but my contention is that the covers of many more of the African American Chick Lit/ Urban pieces that currently proliferate the market not only objectify women, but are insidious in their implication that the sexuality of women of color is dangerous, threatening, manipulative, and a tool used simply to further their ability to consume and gain material worth.



The craziest thing is that these marketing ploys have worked. Chick lit and its sub-genre of African American chick lit (that often stakes claim in the Urban genre as well) has become a relatively new, but burgeoning genre. The glossy pink covers and shiny, bold script of these novels “written for women, by women” seem to proliferate our bookstore shelves at an ever increasing rate with virtually no commentary on their content or impact on an ever-increasing readership (OED).

Selling Out and Showing Skin: Hip Hop Videos in the (Chick) Lit Imagination

Since the creation of Music Television (MTV) in 1981 and Black Entertainment Television (BET) in 1980 music videos have become an extremely popular form in our current media landscape. This being the case, many hip hop videos and their representation within the genre of Chick Lit specifically, have become a visual medium through which one can identify the ongoing commodification of the sexuality of women of color as well as the way in which women and men alike are groomed for mainstream success. It is my contention that these pieces not only objectify the bodies of women of color through salacious and overt sexual positioning, but also exploit common racial prejudices concerning the kinds of success that are acceptable for Black men and women.

A relevant critique of this medium and its representation in Chick Lit can only first be understood by recognizing why music videos exist in our culture and the audience that has been the target for musical genres (most notably hip-hop and R&B) that have historically been dominated by Black people and Black men more specifically. In 1980 Robert L. Johnson founded BET and marketed it with the incentive for television networks to reach a Black audience that had not yet been fully tapped for their money in the marketplace, “Johnson claimed that the networks had failed to promote significant offering to the Black audience. This audience watched more television than any other group and earned \$70 billion annually. BET promised to deliver this unaddressed capital opportunity” (Smith-Shomade 5). MTV was similarly created to fully capitalize on a predominantly White youth market. Music videos have always been simply another way of advertising a performer's album. Record sales are still the

biggest source of revenue for record labels and artists still tend to make the bulk of their income off of merchandising and concert venues (Leeds 1). This being the case, we must keep in mind that music videos not only can give us a way of critiquing societal representation of class, gender, and race, but that they are also, at their most basic level, a way to hawk the artist's merchandise.

This being said, *Bling* portrays the relationship between an up-and-coming performer and a media executive who is looking to cultivate the performer's image for mainstream success and ultimately exploit this for as much material gain as possible. Sadly, this kind of relationship has been seen time and time again in novels, films, and real life, "In the past A&R (artist and repertoire) agents acquired undiscovered talents and fashioned them to the music company's need and vision for a particular commodity fit" (Smith-Shomade 13). As a high-powered record executive, Lamont is easily willing to capitulate to racial stereotypes, affectively changing and manipulating the character or look of their client, in order to garner money or the trappings of fame.

In *Bling*, as I have discussed briefly earlier, the protagonist Mimi and her new record executive boss/ boyfriend forge a relationship that not only exploits Mimi's sexuality in *his* bedroom, but also in her media representation as a breakout R&B artist. From day one, Lamont not only instructs Mimi to change her outward appearance, but literally pays for it as well. Mimi's image and body are groomed as she visits and buys at several Manhattan beauty and image destinations, "The other day [Mimi] realized that [Lamont] had sent her to six 'improvement specialists' (vocal coach, dermatologist, hairstylist, cosmetic dentist, personal trainer, media coach) even though he'd initially told her she was gorgeous and talented" (Kennedy 171). Secondly, Lamont's insistence for Mimi to "*read* Black" is in contradiction to the way in which he wants her to groom her appearance to fit a traditionally white model of beauty and femininity, "Listen to me,' Lamont said sharply. 'It matters. Image is everything and we can't have you being all wishy-washy on that point. We need you to *read* black" (Kennedy 170). Understanding this kind of mentality is key to understanding how traditional dominant white discourses concerning acceptable

Black bodies has proliferated into the minds of many Black people. Lamont wants Mimi's look to conform to traditional notions of white femininity and beauty, but Lamont hasn't just internalized these notions, he believes that he is manipulating the system to his own advantage because he presumes that he knows that the majority of his audience will deem this look as acceptably beautiful. On the other hand, Lamont still wants Mimi to *read* Black or to verbally identify as Black to her audience so that she will be understood as a part of the Black community that Lamont believes will buy her album. It would be “selling out” for Mimi to identify with her mother's Italian (white) heritage because this would codify her as being a more privileged Other in a society where white mainstream culture still largely dominates, “in contexts controlled by (an) Other, it was necessary to behave as a collective Black Self while suppressing the desire to promote the individual Self” (Fordham as quoted in Richardson 797). Lamont doesn't want Mimi to appear as though she is promoting her individual self or is more elite than the Black community, but by exploiting the positives of both of Mimi's racial identities – white for “beauty” and Black for “street cred” Lamont is really just continuing to exploit Mimi's body for material gain. He is working within a system that continues to devalue individual identities and continually puts forth stereotypical ideas about white and Black people that are disadvantageous to everyone because of the way they polarize these identities in our society.

In *Shaded Lives: African American Women and Television* Beretta Smith-Shomade points out the irony of many of these images that have been created by agents and media executives is that they purport to be “keeping it real” by depicting an artist (in music videos or on television) as tough, “street”, or “ghettoized,” when in reality this might be nothing like the actual artists background or personality, “Discussed extensively by scholars and the media, rap artists, for example, often perpetuate and articulate a persona antithetical to their particular life experiences. Often an impoverished, gang-bangin criminal existence becomes the artist's popular persona, sometimes in direct opposition to a working-class existence he or she led prerecording contract or that the artist maintains post-platinum success. Moving

away from this persona even when success affords vastly different living situations, nets cries of 'selling out' and not 'keeping it real.'" (Smith-Shomade 13). The reality is that this isn't "keeping it real" it's easy. When media executives, Black or white, create a monolithic group of rap and hip hop stars, many of whom are pretending to be tougher, more impoverished, more street smart, and especially more violent than they really are, they are really just perpetuating a racist dialogue that makes it easier for many upper-class people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds to understand their existing racial prejudices as truly correct and lacking opposition. This is seen time and again throughout the *The Accidental Diva* when the protagonist Billie feels like she isn't "urban" or "street" enough as compared to her ex-drug dealing boyfriend Jay because of the private school she attended as a child and her middle class upbringing in Washington D.C. (Williams 7). Although "keeping it real" these music industry executives as well as the authors of Urban/ African American Chick Lit really aren't showing reality. The real world contains vastly different and unique experiences for all people including Black people and other people of color, but a novel like *The Accidental Diva* gives the reader a dichotomous model of Black Americans that is either poor or rich or "street" versus "glamorous." We as readers are rarely presented with round characters that are "regular" people and this is one of the most unfortunate aspects of many of the novels in this genre.

After all this discussion of the stereotypical representations of Black men and women in Urban/ African American Chick Lit I know you might be thinking, "couldn't all of these over-the-top depictions simply be the satirical work of authors hoping to poke fun and draw social attention to misogyny and racism?" Unfortunately, I can't believe that this is the case. This is not satire. At the core of satire there is care and a want to uplift by pointing out social injustice. Care would compel you to poke fun at the power-structures, the virtually unchallenged legitimacy of white and middle-class apathy (at the very least). We are invited to judge these characters, and judge ourselves better by comparison. Satire implicates the privileged audience, and empathizes with the less privileged. Instead, this is ridicule. At the core of these novels there is contempt not only for the bodies of Black women and men through

overly and unnecessarily sexualized depictions, but contempt for the real women and men who might see these characters as role models. For the privileged audience, the author, and publisher there is self-satisfaction because they are able to identify themselves against this stereotypical representation and, in the case of the author and publisher, are able to profit from this kind of easy and one-dimensional portrayal. For the underprivileged audience, there is only more violence, more ridicule, and never a prescription for change.

If not satire, many publishers, authors, and readers alike will contend that these novels are simply reflecting the representations of Black men and women that currently proliferate our society. Many, like Ulen and Richardson as I have noted earlier, believe that these representations are negative to Black people specifically and to our society at large, but I contend that these images that are present in Urban/African American Chick Lit as well as hiphop and mainstream culture are, as Michael Eric Dyson states, even more cynical and disadvantageous because they provide no suitable positive alternative or option for change

[Cultural representations] are not just a mirror. Martin Luther King Jr. if he worked off a mirror would have said I'm going to reflect back to white pathological society the white supremacy they put in it. He said "no" it's not a mirror. I got a dream. A dream shatters the mirror that is reflected back to what they create in us. And we can create different models, paradigms, and understandings ourselves...We have to have a broader complex of images [of Black women] from which to draw. (Hip Hop vs. America)

If people, namely authors and publishers, continue to simply represent and recapitulate the most negative stereotypes about Black people, as is done in the Urban/African American chick lit pieces that I have examined, they are doing a disservice to our entire society and their reading audience by simply describing a detrimental situation with no hint for improvement.

It is my contention that this kind of Urban fiction and African American Chick Lit can have a

wide reaching negative impact on the audience that consumes it, especially when that audience is made up of young Black men and women and other people of color who look to character representations as role models for behavior and identity formation. In this way I believe that Elaine Richardson's discussion about Black discourse practices is applicable both to hip-hop (as was her original intention) as well as to a new burgeoning genre of Urban Chick Lit, "Black discourse practices influence how black people read and respond to the social world...Hip-hop literacies refers to ways in which people are socialized into hip-hop discourse manipulate as well as read language, gestures, images, material possessions, and people, to position themselves against or within discourses in order to advance and protect themselves" (Richardson 792). Urban literature and African American Chick Lit have created a literary discourse that not only values material possessions, but states that material possessions are the most important aspects of human existence even if people, especially women, have to be manipulated and exploited in order to gain these trappings.

These kinds of ideas are proclaimed through our media to Black children specifically, but really almost everyone, from an early age as the only way that one can advance him or herself in our society and this has been extremely disadvantageous for everyone:

More money, more stimulation, more status all of them idolatrous in the end. We all need money. We all need some pleasure. We all like to have a little bit of status. But, when those are the only ones coming at one especially when you're young - the power of television, video and film, and so forth, and music that people get stunted; they're growth gets stunted because they don't realize that they are other things in life other than greed, pleasure, power, and status. (West Hip Hop vs. America).

Novels that glamorize consumption and the attainment of iconography perpetuate that the only things that young Black people should be concerned with is gaining status through wealth. All the while, this mentality devalues the positive contributions that can be made by young people if we simply place more value on pursuits other than money and fame. With a mentality more grounded in positive social change we might begin to see more hip-hop songs and literary representations coming from this young age group

that can debunk common stereotypes and expectations.

The readers of the pieces of Urban fiction/ African American Chick Lit that I have referenced throughout this piece have been done a major disservice. Many will believe that these narrow and stereotypical depictions are really an accurate portrayal of the lives of a majority of Black Americans simply because these novels are such a large part of the literary work available from Black authors about the lives of Black men and women. We have already seen that critically acclaimed and award winning Black fiction written by Black authors like *Shifting Through Neutral* or the Angela Biven's mystery series are being pushed aside by publishers and booksellers who don't believe that these novels can sell, but what can we do about it?

Consumption and Chick Lit : a Conclusion with Change

The truth is that the pieces of fiction that I have critiqued throughout this paper would be non-existent if they lacked a readership that purchased them. I contend that a lack of positive choices for readers is what has allowed these kinds of negative Urban and African American Chick Lit novels to proliferate our bookstores. Only through informed and critical consumption can we as readers make publishers, booksellers, and authors aware of what we truly want to read and see represented in Black literature

Hyper-sexualized Black characters in urban fiction poison us all, even those of use who don't read the stuff, stuff too vulgar to be quoted in this magazine. Salacious street lit creeps into Black people's bone marrow, alters Black people's souls, diminishes our beautiful shining power as a people. The antidote exists. We simply must use our consumer dollars to support the rich, textured experiences of African Americans as rendered by authors who craft their work, honor our literary tradition and remember, clearly, with each word they write, the many ancestors who died so we could tell our stories, who died so we could put pen to paper at all” (Ulen 21).

It is important that we understand the many sacrifices that have been made in order for Black authors to

have the opportunity to write and be published and in knowing this give your respect and dollar as a reader to authors who are truly attempting to garner social and cultural change.

These kinds of stereotypical images of Black people really are detrimental to all of us who want to live in a society that equally values the contributions of all its citizens, but we must first recognize how these kinds of mentalities and ideologies have come into being. Considering historical oppressions that have disenfranchised many Black people is the first step in creating a new dialogue and a market that values the Black fiction and hip hop that already do have positive representations as well as creating even more.